



JIM CASEY

YOUTH

OPPORTUNITIES  
INITIATIVE

# the Adolescent Brain

new research  
and its implications  
for young people  
transitioning  
from foster care

E X E C U T I V E   S U M M A R Y

“Some helpful things adults did to help me make sense of some of the things in my past was first to acknowledge that it happened and that I didn’t have to do it alone. I was encouraged not to own the ‘label’ but to keep going and to not let it be a hindrance or roadblock.”

—Former Foster Youth, age 20

The Adolescent Brain: New Research and Its Implications for Young People Transitioning From Foster Care,  
Executive Summary

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The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative’s mission is to ensure that the young people who leave foster care are able to make successful transitions to adulthood. In an effort to improve the systems that support them, the Initiative promotes the strategies of: youth voice, community partnerships, research and evaluation, public will and policy, and the creation of a range of opportunities for young people. It works in partnership with communities and states across the country to integrate these strategies into the core work of state child welfare agencies and other strategic allies.

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“It’s not that foster care tells what you can’t do. It’s that nobody ever tells you what you *can* do.”

—Lynn Twigg, age 28

# The Adolescent Brain: New Research and Its Implications for Young People Transitioning From Foster Care

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

Many disciplines have contributed to the knowledge base regarding what enables young people in foster care to succeed. Now, neuroscience has added critical data to that base by revealing that in adolescence, the brain experiences a period of major development comparable to that of early childhood.

Among the implications of the new data is this: Adolescents must take on distinct developmental tasks in order to move through emerging adulthood and become healthy, connected, and productive adults—and young people in foster care often lack the supports needed to complete these tasks.

Unlike younger children in foster care, for whom safety and protection are the greatest need, older youth are in the process of developing greater autonomy and practicing adult roles and responsibilities. It is during adolescence and early adulthood that we develop a personal sense of identity, establish emotional and psychological independence, establish adult vocational goals, learn to manage sexuality and sexual identity, adopt a personal value system, and develop increased impulse control and behavioral maturity. Chemical changes in the brain that prime adolescents for risk-taking present rich opportunities for them to learn from experience and mistakes and, with adult support, gain greater self-regulation, coping, and resiliency skills.

By the age of 25, young people need to be “connected,” that is, “embedded in networks—families, friends, and communities—that provide guidance, support, and help, both financial and otherwise, when they face the crises that are an inevitable part of the transition” to adulthood.<sup>1</sup> It is by being connected that young people find love and acceptance for who they are, what they have experienced, and who they can become as caring adults. Becoming connected by 25 is especially important for older youth and young adults in foster care, because as a result of their life experiences, they are often disconnected from supportive networks. Family and caring adults are essential social capital for young people, and so the field of child welfare must make building social relationships and networks a priority in all services intended to promote permanency and prepare young people for adulthood.

Science also has contributed to a more in-depth understanding of the impact of trauma on the developing brain. Positive youth development services, opportunities, and supports are essential in counteracting the effects of trauma to promote healthy brain and social development in adolescence. In addition, research on complex trauma and ambiguous loss reveal the critical need for effective trauma-informed and trauma-specific practices in addressing the identity and grief-related issues that older youth and young adults in foster care are likely to experience. The concepts of resiliency and neuroplasticity provide a foundation for developing trauma-informed child welfare practice and trauma-specific mental health services and supports for young people in foster care.

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1 Wald, M. & Martinez, T. (2003). *Connected by 25: Improving the life chances of the country's most vulnerable 14-24 year olds*, p. 2. Retrieved February 9, 2011 from [http://www.wyftg.org/documents/connectedby25\\_OOS.pdf](http://www.wyftg.org/documents/connectedby25_OOS.pdf).

“If you don’t have anybody that believes in you, how do you believe in yourself? That’s one of the biggest things that foster youth deal with. Nobody cares if they succeed, so they think, ‘Well, why do I care if I succeed?’ which is sad.”

—Mike Peno, age 22

The emerging science of adolescent brain development has deepened the understanding of adolescent capabilities and behaviors. Neuroscience has made clear that the brain is not “done” by age 6 as was previously believed. Instead, the adolescent brain continues to develop, providing a window of opportunity similar to that which is open in early childhood. Adolescence is a period of “use it or lose it” in brain development. Young people’s experiences during this period play a critical role in shaping their futures as adults. They can build and practice resiliency and develop knowledge and skills that will positively serve them throughout adulthood.

## Recommendations

### 1. TAKE A POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACH TO ALL OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN FOSTER CARE

Positive youth development is not merely a good practice, it is a neurological imperative. Positive youth development is especially critical for young people in care who may be experiencing developmental delays as a result of trauma and loss. Adolescence is a period of “use it or lose it” in brain development. When young people are actively engaged in positive relationships and opportunities to contribute, create, and lead, they “use it” to develop their skills to become successful adults. It is through the formation of internal and external assets—including family and community—that young people thrive. Multiple positive relationships are essential in supporting them in achieving their unique aspirations. The chemistry of the adolescent brain is what often causes young people to seek new excitement through increasingly risky behaviors.

Young people need positive youth development opportunities so that they can engage in healthy risk-taking via constructive, meaningful activities.

### Implementing this Recommendation

- Use a positive youth development approach for all young people in foster care, including those who may be experiencing developmental delays due to trauma and loss.
- Focus on the development of internal and external assets so that youth thrive.
- Continually provide young people with opportunities to connect with their families and communities.
- Intentionally create opportunities for involvement in extracurricular and community groups. Such activities ensure that young people spend time with multiple caring adults.
- Provide young people with the information, skills, and supports they need to drive the direction of their own lives. Help them see the results of their choices and actions.
- Frequently discuss with the young person his or her strengths, interests, talents, goals, and aspirations. Help them clarify their goals and aspirations.
- Provide young people with the resources to pursue a passion that may lead to a sense of purpose in their lives. Examples of resources might include materials such as musical instruments or art supplies, the means to attend events related to their interests, or the opportunity to take classes that will help them develop their skills.

“We need a safe program/environment where youth are challenged to step up and take their future into their hands, but also with the assurance that there will be adults cheering them on and making themselves available to help when needed.”

—Eddye Vanderkwaak, age 20

## 2. PROVIDE “INTERDEPENDENT” LIVING SERVICES THAT CONNECT YOUNG PEOPLE WITH FAMILY AND CARING ADULTS

Science has shown that diverse social relationships and networks—the essence of social capital—are crucial to healthy development and functioning. They act as protective factors that build young people’s knowledge, skills, and confidence and aid in the successful transition to adulthood, resiliency, and recovery from trauma. It is imperative that all systems interacting with older youth in foster care help them to create social capital through relationships with family (including siblings), other caring adults, the neighborhood and community, and peers. Although independent living services produce some benefits by imparting knowledge and certain skills, they have not been effective in supporting young people in building and sustaining social capital. Young people in foster care must experience “interdependent living” so that they gain the knowledge, practical skills, and social capital that will support them into adulthood.

### Implementing this Recommendation

- Connect young people in foster care with family members—parents, siblings, members of the extended family—and other caring adults. Such efforts should be ongoing and should begin as early as possible. Provide support to help these relationships become lifelong and perhaps legal.
- Give young people opportunities to develop relational competencies—the skills they need to form and maintain healthy relationships. Assist them in building social relationships and networks.
- Make all possible efforts to keep young people in one community where they can establish

connections. A wide range of adults, such as mentors or teachers, can provide young people with a sense of rootedness. These individuals also act as role models, providing opportunities to develop adult skills and relationships.

- Minimize barriers to normal relationships. Efforts might involve providing transportation to events or making it easier in other ways for young people to have a part-time job, spend time with friends, date, and participate in a range of social and faith-based events.
- Place young people in family-based settings where social, educational, and employment activities are supported as normal adolescent behaviors. Do not use congregate care settings. By their nature, these are not conducive to supporting young people in engaging activities that help them “practice” for adulthood, or to helping young people build social capital.

## 3. ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE IN THEIR OWN PLANNING AND DECISIONMAKING

Providing young people with opportunities for healing and corrective relationship experiences helps to “rewire” adolescents’ brains for effective decisionmaking as adults. And youth engagement in planning and decisionmaking is widely known as best practice in meeting the needs of young people in foster care. Combining these two approaches by engaging young people in their own transition plans makes the most of a period of profound brain development. The resulting plan is more effective because it has the endorsement of the young person, and the planning process has provided a safe opportunity for the young person to learn from mistakes of judgment and practice adult roles alongside others on the team.

“I like guiding. I understand I may not have the best knowledge, but it is my life. I will be an independent adult. The decisions being made affect me for a lifetime.”

—Samanthya Amann, age 20

### Implementing this Recommendation

- Use strength-based planning processes that are directed by the young people themselves. Promote young people’s active engagement in all discussions and decisionmaking. Encourage young people to lead meetings whenever possible.
- Create partnerships between young people and adults. These partnerships should be with adults who can model self-determination and healthy decisionmaking.
- Recognize the importance of healthy risk-taking by giving young people the chance to make their own decisions, even when it is not what adults agree upon.
- Understand that the adolescent brain is wired for risk and that child welfare practices designed to eliminate all risk are not developmentally appropriate for emerging adults. Re-assess policies and practices based on this understanding.
- Place young people in family-based settings—as opposed to group care—to provide environments for healthy risk-taking and learning.

#### 4. BE TRAUMA-INFORMED TO PROMOTE HEALING AND EMOTIONAL SECURITY

Adolescence is as critical a phase of human brain development as the early years of childhood. Just as early maltreatment and subsequent trauma can negatively impact brain development, positive experiences during adolescence can strengthen healthy neural connections and promote learning. Science has shown that even when a young person has experienced complex trauma, neuroplasticity makes the brain capable of overcoming trauma and gaining resiliency in the face of risk. While child

welfare staff and others working with young people in foster care do not need to be trauma specialists, they do need to engage in trauma-informed practice—that is, they need to understand the impact of young people’s experiences with trauma and ambiguous loss on their brain development and provide supports and opportunities to reverse that impact.

### Implementing this Recommendation

- Ensure that child welfare and other service systems’ staff are trauma-informed. They should:
  - have core knowledge about trauma and its impact of trauma on child and youth development;
  - recognize that young people can be re-traumatized by the systems and services designed to help them; and
  - create safe, comfortable, and welcoming environments for young people.
- Distribute information about trauma, complex trauma, ambiguous loss, neuroplasticity, and resilience throughout child welfare agencies and care provider networks. Staff do not need to be trauma intervention specialists, but they do need to be able to assess and appropriately refer young people in their care. New information increases staff understanding about the importance of meeting the developmental needs of older youth in foster care.
- Create opportunities for young people to make sense of their life histories and current experiences. Acknowledge the impact of ambiguous loss and its accompanying grief. Addressing such losses helps minimize negative impacts on identity development and relationship building.

“Staying in foster care is the last thing that youth in care who have had a bad experience want to hear. What if we package this different?”

—Sixto Cancel, age 19

- Review current assessment tools to ensure that they reflect the new and emerging knowledge base about trauma and adolescent brain development. Revise these tools as needed or develop new tools.
- Promote positive and permanent family relationships that meet the young person’s needs for support and guidance. Support the family members so that they are trauma-informed, understanding young people’s needs and behaviors.
- Develop trauma-specific services that can address the full range of needs presented by young people who have experienced complex trauma.
- Refer young people in need of trauma-specific interventions to skilled and caring clinicians.
- Establish peer support groups to help young people work through their experiences with ambiguous loss and develop a positive identity. Such groups can also serve as a form of social capital for young people in foster care.

## 5. EXTEND DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE FOSTER CARE TO AGE 21

For all young people, including older youth and young adults in foster care, the process of becoming an adult is an extended one, lasting into the mid-twenties or even later. The brain continues to mature throughout this developmental period. Foster care for young people ages 18 to 21 must be quite different than foster care for younger children. For these older youth, foster care is a voluntary service that addresses age-specific developmental needs: completing high school and beginning post-secondary education,

securing employment, assuming leadership in the community, and forging healthy and nurturing connections with family and/or other caring adults. For older youth in foster care who have not yet achieved permanent family relationships through reunification, adoption, or guardianship, the goal of achieving committed and enduring relationships is increasingly urgent. Without these vital assets, they face the possibility of leaving foster care disconnected from social relationships and networks that are important to their ongoing well-being.

### Implementing this Recommendation

- Allow young people to remain in foster care until age 21. Use this time to maximize progress toward adult roles and responsibilities in ways that are safe, healthy, and productive.
- Use extended foster care to focus on self-determination and resilience. Ensure that young people can skillfully navigate major life transitions, not simply the one from adolescence to adulthood.
- Focus extensively on helping young people find and engage with family. Support young people in creating or re-establishing lasting family relationships and other connections that they will need as adults.
- Provide young people with opportunities to practice decisionmaking and other aspects of adult roles. Allow them to learn from mistakes and experience while providing the “home base” that parents typically provide for their non-foster care peers.



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